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Testimony of the Honorable Clifford M. Hardin
Secretary of Agriculture
before the
Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs
May 7, 1969

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee:

I welcome this opportunity to discuss with this Committee the present status of our food assistance programs and our plans to make them more effective in improving nutrition in this country. This Committee is serving a most useful purpose in alerting the American people to the problems of poverty in the midst of plenty.

The problems of poverty and malnutrition are intricate and inter-related. And there is a close relationship between food programs and public assistance. So I am pleased that Secretary Finch is appearing with me today. We have been working together on these programs.

We have taken a good, thorough look at the food assistance programs of the United States Department of Agriculture. Although the day will come -- must come -- when such programs will not be necessary -- that day is not yet here. We are, therefore, working to streamline and expand existing programs so they will better meet the need for improved nutrition.

I am very pleased to be able to comment today on the food and nutrition program proposed by the Administration. This is the largest, most comprehensive effort to eliminate poverty-caused hunger and malnutrition ever proposed by any Administration.

It is a program that will build on operations already in progress to combat malnutrition. We are not starting from scratch. We are not discarding any worthwhile programs already in progress. We are improving and expanding an attack on hunger in America that is already well underway.

Before commenting on the details of the proposed program, I believe it would be helpful to summarize the present situation.

Among our population, those who are most vulnerable to the effects of continuing inadequate diets are new and expectant mothers, infants and children. Of these vulnerable groups the largest consists of children from the immediate pre-school age through secondary school.

We must reach these children. And we must reach them on a year-round basis. We can supply one or two good meals a day to these children through schools, day care centers and summer recreational programs during vacation when the schools are not open.

We already have the legislation to do this.

We have asked for a substantial increase in the funding for these programs for fiscal year 1970. Last year -- fiscal year 1968 -- some 2.3 million needy children received lunch free or at a greatly reduced price. With the money the Congress appropriated for the current fiscal year, we hope to reach about 3.5 million needy children. With the money requested for fiscal year 1970, we should be able to close the gap and provide 6.6 million needy school children with free or greatly reduced priced lunches.

To accomplish this we will need the full cooperation of the Nation's elementary school systems, particularly those in the big cities. We are aggressively soliciting their help. And we are making some notable break-throughs. Since last fall we have brought into a school food service for the first time 566 schools with 140,307 children participating.

We now have enough flexibility to be able to reach every needy child -- those in schools with an enrollment drawn almost entirely from the children of low-income parents and those in schools with a mixture of poor and near-poor children.

This Committee will be pleased to know that, with the funds requested for next year, we will be able to provide at least one-half of the daily nutritional requirements for needy children wherever we can get these youngsters together in groups and where local agencies will cooperate fully.

An increased level of funding has been requested to get our supplemental food package program into operation in as many low-income areas as possible. We operate this program in cooperation with the Public Health Service and OEO. It offers a variety of enriched foods selected to meet the special nutritional needs of expectant and new mothers, infants and very young children.

This program is open to any local jurisdiction -- whether they have the food stamp or commodity donation program or no family food assistance program at all. At the moment, there are 83 of these programs in operation with a participation of 25,000 -- about 70 percent of the participants are infants and young children.

Our programs for family food assistance -- commodity distribution and food stamp -- are steadily acquiring additional muscle. We are now down to some 440 counties and independent cities that do not yet have a food assistance program. Programs are operating in areas that have 86 percent of the total U.S. population. In February, participation in both programs totaled 6.8 million persons.

We have asked for \$30 million for fiscal year 1970 for the Extension Service nutrition aides program -- three times the amount programmed for this year.

By July 1, 1969, there will be 5,300 aides recruited from low-income families, trained in the basics of good nutrition, food buying and menu planning. They will be working with their neighbors in low-income areas, telling the story and selling the importance of good nutrition and how to get it.

They will be assisting 100,000 families. As of March 31, our reports show that 3,591 aides had been trained and were at work in 39 States. There were 54,223 families with 261,500 family members in the program, beginning to learn about good nutrition. An additional 418 aides were in training.

We have great hopes for this program. Although it has been in operation only a few months the aides are finding ways to communicate. We think this is an activity which fully merits support.

That summarizes three major food and nutrition service activities of the Department: Child feeding programs, food distribution and nutrition education.

As we look at the nation's needs, however, it is obvious that major changes are required, particularly with respect to programs serving families.

We must take a new look at our food stamp efforts. Our current rate of expenditures for food stamps funded on an annual basis is \$340 million and this is the amount we had earlier requested in the 1970 budget. This is the maximum currently authorized under the law.

We do not think this is enough if we are going to be effective in meeting the nutritional requirements of the very poor.

There is also a need to achieve a greater concentration of effort.

And there is a need to galvanize public sentiment and support behind an effective attack on malnutrition.

This Administration, therefore, is proposing action to meet all these needs.

New Recommendations on Food and Nutrition

1. We propose an expansion of the food stamp program sufficient to provide, for those now under the program, a fully nutritional diet. For a typical family of four this requires an expenditure for food of about \$100 per month. For the poorest families this represents an increase of approximately 65 percent.

2. We propose during fiscal year 1970 to establish a stamp program or a direct food distribution program in each county in the United States. Eventually the modified food stamp program will be progressively expanded and will be given priorities over the food distribution program.

3. Food stamps will be given without cost to families without income or those in the very lowest income brackets -- \$30 per month or less for a family of four.

4. The cost of food stamps to any family will not exceed 30 percent of income and will be less than this for the poorest families.

5. A Food and Nutrition Service will be established as a separate agency within the U. S. Department of Agriculture with the Administrator reporting directly to the Secretary. Food programs are currently a part of USDA's Consumer and Marketing Service, a large and complex agency. With the food programs rapidly expanding, the new Service will permit greater concentration and emphasis on these operations. Coordination and effectiveness of the programs will be correspondingly improved.

6. Pilot programs will be established to use a cash voucher system in the special supplemental food program for expectant and new mothers, infants, babies, and small children. We will attempt in this way to eliminate some of the logistical problems involved in providing the supplemental food packages by taking full advantage of the private food marketing system.

7. There will be established, (under the Food and Nutrition Committee of the Council on Urban Affairs) an Interdepartmental Food and Nutrition Liaison Committee concerned with poverty, malnutrition, and health. An especially close interdepartmental relationship will be maintained between USDA, HEW, and OEO.

8. A White House Conference on Food and Nutrition will be called. Leaders from the food industry, farm groups, labor and community service organizations, churches, education institutions, and other groups will be asked to mount a greatly expanded private sector campaign against hunger and malnutrition. This will be coordinated with HUD's new Voluntary Action Program.

9. Research on the relationship between malnutrition and the intellectual, emotional, and physical development of the child will be expanded.

10. As I mentioned earlier, 1970 budget requests for child food assistance programs will bring a free or reduced-priced lunch to all school children from low-income families. A legislative proposal will be developed to provide standards of eligibility for the school lunch and breakfast programs.

11. Legal authority will be requested to permit the Secretary of Agriculture to authorize operation of both a food stamp and direct distribution program in the same county or city under certain conditions such as:

- (a) During the period of transition from direct distribution to a food stamp program,

(b) When the Secretary determines the special needs of the community demand both programs, and provided that State or local authorities agree to pay the added costs of administration.

We hope all these new programs may be made effective during the next fiscal year. Some of them we can put into effect administratively much sooner, but others will require legislative action.

For fiscal 1970 the expansion in the food stamp program will require an estimated \$270 million to \$275 million above the presently proposed budget. In addition, funds will be requested for new research programs.

In fiscal year 1971 it is estimated that the added costs of the proposed new and expanded programs, including a progressive changeover from food distribution to food stamps, will be in excess of one billion dollars.

Before closing, I want to emphasize two points. One is that the proposed expansion of food programs has been fully worked out with the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The proposed food programs are so structured that they will adjust easily to possible changes in welfare programs. We have been, and are, working with Secretary Finch and his staff to develop a coordinated food and public assistance plan for the long term.

The second point -- and I want to emphasize it as strongly as I can -- is that the success or failure of our Federal efforts to eliminate hunger and poverty-induced malnutrition depends heavily on the level of concern and action by the States and local communities.

We are going to ask for a higher level of participation by the private sector. We are going to ask everyone active in church groups, civic groups, civil rights and business and labor organizations to support us in this drive to bring good nutrition to every child and family in this country. We are going to ask them to take a good look at what their State is doing -- what their community is doing -- and to join wholeheartedly in wiping out in this land of plenty the scourge of poverty-caused hunger and malnutrition.

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